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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000287

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: SEVERE CENSUS PROBLEMS BUT SUCCESSFUL VOTER LIST  
STILL POSSIBLE

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 200

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- According to electoral commission member Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, as of March 2, the scheduled halfway point for the census, only about 30% of all eligible voters have been counted and registered. (This census is designed not to count the number of all Mauritians but to register those eligible to vote.)

-- Given the slow progress in the census and associated voter registration, the Ministry of the Interior will extend the census by as much as one month, according to the UN,s electoral assistance team.

-- The UN team has heard reports of Afro-Mauritians having a harder time getting national ID cards than have Moors, but the team has no direct evidence of such discrimination.

-- Even with these problems, the June 24 constitutional referendum has not (yet) been delayed.

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(C) Comments  
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-- The census and associated national voter list are hugely important.

-- If a flawed census produces a national voter list that fails to meet international standards, then Mauritania will be right back to where it was in 2003. During the 2003 presidential election, many Mauritians viewed the election of President Taya as fraudulent, because the national voter list was incomplete and skewed.

-- Any political leader elected on the basis of a similarly suspect voter list will lack legitimacy. That will encourage political gridlock and more coup-plotting.

-- The Embassy continues to press the electoral commission and transitional government to meet international standards for the census and voter list. The Ambassador plans to speak

out publicly on the issue next week during a trip to northern Mauritania, when he will meet with regional political party leaders and election commission workers.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (U) Emboffs met with members of the UN's Electoral Assistance Team, an NDI representative and a member of the National Independent Electoral Commission March eighth and ninth to discuss the status of the census/voter registration drive currently scheduled to end March 16.

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CENSUS COUNT AND TIMELINE  
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¶2. (C) According to electoral commission member Cheikh Saad Bouh Kamara, as of March 2 -- the scheduled halfway point for the census -- 302,000 voters had been registered out of what he estimated to be between 900,000 and 1,000,000 eligible citizens. "The process is approximately 30 percent complete," Kamara said, adding that "after hitting a few delays in the first week we have begun registering people at a faster pace."

¶3. (C) National Democratic Institute representative Eric Duhaime told Ambassador on March 9 that the government and electoral commission have "continued to lower the estimate of eligible citizens from an original figure of more than 1.3 million, down to 1.1 million, and now to as low as 900,000," adding that "the census is clearly not going to be as successful as some had originally hoped."

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¶4. (C) Principal Technical Advisor for the UN,s Electoral Assistance Project Mathieu Bile Bouah told DCM that the decision to extend the census by two weeks to one month had already been made within the government, but would not be made public until just before the scheduled end of the census on March 16. According to Bile this was designed to avoid discouraging would-be voters from registering in accordance with the current timeline.

¶5. (C) The voter lists -- which the National Office for Statistics began creating March 2 -- are scheduled for completion in May, with the Constitutional Referendum set for June 24. However, the census extension will likely push the completion of the voter lists into June. There has been no discussion of a potential extension of the June 24 Referendum date.

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DISCRIMINATION IN THE CENSUS?  
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¶6. (C) The UN team has noted reports in the press and elsewhere of Afro-Mauritanians having a harder time getting National ID Cards and registering than Moors, but has no direct evidence of such discrimination. The team has the impression that the electoral commission is supportive of the inclusion of all Mauritians in the census, but does not know if this sentiment is shared by the Ministry of the Interior that is actually conducting the census.

¶7. (C) The team noted that whether institutionally encouraged or not, discrimination of Afro-Mauritanians is a national reality that could result in harassment or discrimination in the National ID Card issuance and census processes.

¶8. (C) Kamara responded to this point by expressing his confidence in the "open and fair approach" exhibited by the officials. He gave several examples of registration problems that have affected Moor and Afro-Mauritanian citizens alike, and outlined the steps taken to ensure that future problems are addressed in a timely manner -- including improved access

by citizens to regional and national electoral commission members.

¶9. (C) Kamara added that while limited discrimination was possible, the statistics he had seen showed healthy registration and National ID Card issuance rates throughout the country, including along the Senegal River where a majority of the citizens are Afro-Mauritanian -- he was not able to provide Poloff with specific statistics during the meeting, but promised to do so in the subsequent days. Kamara added that the government had taken several steps to ensure strong Afro-Mauritanian participation in elections, citing the voter lists which will be published in both Arabic and French -- in past elections the lists were in Arabic only, a language not spoken by many Afro-Mauritanians.

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WHERE CAN VOTERS BE REGISTERED?  
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¶10. (C) In their General Assembly meeting March 3, members of the National Independent Electoral Commission announced that Mauritanian law prohibits the registration of voters or candidates in an area that they had not resided in for at least the previous six months. The electoral commission followed the declaration with an official request to the government to take action to stop the growing practice. According to Kamara, the action was needed to "scare those that had been hiring trucks and transporting citizens from their community to other -- potentially more strategic -- areas to be registered to vote." Kamara went on to explain that "many electoral zones have as few as 1,000 eligible voters and such a transplanting of voters could greatly affect the results of the municipal elections in these areas."

¶11. (C) According to Christine MacCallum, the Training Expert with the UN's Electoral Assistance Project, commission members had received numerous calls on their personal phones both in support of and opposition to such "displaced" registration. The UN team believes that the commission was

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thus under significant pressure to take a public stand on the matter. Bile added that the electoral commission should have investigated the matter more fully and suggested solutions to the government, rather than merely making a legalistic declaration and leaving it to the government for resolution.

¶12. (C) Bile also acknowledged that potential candidates are registering in areas where they have tribal ties, rather than where they live, in order to have a better chance of winning. Also unresolved is where people who live in rural areas not incorporated into a commune will be allowed to vote.

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ELECTORAL COMMISSION PLANS FOR ELECTIONS  
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¶13. (C) Kamara said the electoral commission wants to hire and train 4,000 representatives to ensure that one electoral commission representative is present at each polling station during elections. These representatives would serve as "the eyes and ears of the commission" and could "help ensure that there aren't any problems on election day," Kamara said. The commission has asked the UN to provide funding and technical training to achieve this. However, the UN team told Emboffs that this was unlikely due to limited resources and timing constraints.

¶14. (C) To address the difficulties of issuing National ID Cards in rural areas (reftel) the electoral commission has asked the Ministry of the Interior to provide mobile ID card teams that could travel to remote areas and issue ID cards to citizens far removed from the ID card centers located in major cities.  
LeBaron